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# The North Korean Succession

An Intelligence Assessment

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### ***Key Judgments***

North Korea presents a difficult intelligence problem, because Pyongyang still rules over one of the most tightly closed societies in the world. Our understanding of the dynamics of the domestic political situation is especially limited because of the highly personalized rule of North Korean President Kim Il-song. Still, there is a need to assess the prospects for the post-Kim era. In examining Kim Il-song's highly unorthodox approach to the succession question, we have reached the following conclusions:

- For the past five years or so, North Korean President Kim Il-song has been quietly grooming his elder son, Kim Chong-il, as his successor.
- Kim Chong-il, now in his late 30s, has been allowed gradually to assume greater responsibilities in the domestic political and economic realm. He is not, however, identified at public gatherings; his name is not mentioned by the media; and he does not meet with foreigners.
- The elder Kim probably sees several advantages in keeping his succession scheme under wraps:
  - It provides an opportunity for the son to be tested while keeping the elder Kim's options open if his heir does not measure up.
  - It enables Kim Il-song to avoid a lame duck status for himself.
  - It shields North Korea from possible embarrassing commentary from its allies as well as its detractors.
- Socialist states have historically had problems in arranging an orderly transfer of power, and the precedent-setting father-son succession scheme further complicates the task. Still, the special conditions at work in North Korea—its isolation and Kim Il-song's firm grip on the levers of power—render the son's chances perhaps greater than might otherwise be expected.

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- Kim Chong-il's chances will improve if the active, 66-year-old elder Kim holds power for another five or 10 years—particularly if the son finds an appropriate time to "go public." The early removal of Kim Il-song, however, would measurably increase the likelihood of a succession struggle, possibly accompanied by violence. A crucial question will be the extent to which the son has been able to develop alliances in the military and security establishments.
- There is no evidence that the succession scheme is having a significant impact on North Korea's policy. Kim Il-song appears to be keeping a firm grip on all important policy questions, including the central issue of North Korea's strategy and tactics toward reunification of the Korean peninsula on Communist terms.
- If Kim Chong-il does succeed his father, he is likely to emulate him in taking a direct personal interest in various projects and making contacts at the local level; he has shown intense pride in North Korean performance under proper organization and motivation.

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## The North Korean Succession

### **Kim Chong-il—The "Party Center"**

Since at least early 1973, North Korean President Kim Il-song has been grooming his elder son, Kim Chong-il, as his successor. The first indirect allusions to the process occurred in February 1973 when Kim Il-song unveiled the so-called "three revolutions team" movement at a major gathering of the Korean Workers Party (KWP). These teams, made up of representatives from the party, technicians, and students, subsequently have been directly associated with Kim Chong-il. Indeed, the South Korean press jocularly refers to them as Kim Chong-il's "shock troops."

Detailing the activities of Kim Chong-il is not an easy task. The North Korean media do not refer to the son by name and do not identify him at leadership turnouts. Kim Chong-il has never met with foreigners. For a while his picture was displayed in public places in North Korea, but even this practice has been curtailed to reduce speculation among foreign visitors about the son's identity and status.

The regime nevertheless feels that it is necessary to chronicle the exploits of the younger Kim in some manner. To do so, Pyongyang uses special honorific expressions. The most prominent codeword for the son is "party center."

The unraveling of the mystery surrounding the term "party center" is in itself an analytical coup of some merit. At first it was thought that the term was merely an abbreviated reference to the Korean Workers Party Central Committee—a group of more than 100 important party leaders that meets once or twice a year in plenary session. An analyst with FBIS noted, however, that the party center was credited with performing tasks and conducting activities that seemed to be more fitting for an individual than a group.



President Kim Il-song and his son Kim Chong-il (left)

The party center, for example, directed films, made inspection trips, designed city plans, organized youth festivals, and met with various North Korean groups. Moreover, the party center has increasingly been described in terms usually reserved only for Kim Il-song; it is portrayed in the same paternalistic manner—an all-knowing, omnipresent, and compassionate leader who mingles with the common folk and is attentive to their needs.

### **Early Life, Family**

Nepotism is not a new phenomenon in North Korea or, for that matter, other countries in

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Asia. A large number of Kim Il-song's relatives hold important positions in the North Korean hierarchy. Some have demonstrated talent; others clearly have advanced solely on the basis of their relationship to the "great leader."

At one point it appeared that Kim Il-song was actively preparing his younger brother, Kim Yong-chu, for a leading role. At the fifth congress of the KWP in 1970, Kim Yong-chu was elevated to full membership on the KWP political committee, an elite group of some 10 to 15 top party officials. In 1972 Kim Yong-chu led North Korea's delegation to the historic talks between North and South Korea on reunification.

By early 1973 the talks foundered, and Kim Yong-chu began to slip in party ranking. He has since joined the ranks of "nonpersons." Some reports assert that Kim Yong-chu was demoted because of the breakdown in the talks; other reports claim he was in ill health. In any event, Kim Chong-il's fortunes began to rise dramatically at about the time his uncle's took their downturn.

Reliable information on Kim Chong-il's early life is scant. His birthday is celebrated on 16 February; there is still uncertainty about his birth year, although most reports place it in 1940 or 1941. There is also uncertainty concerning the whereabouts of Kim Il-song and Kim Chong-il's mother, Kim Chong-suk, in the early 1940s. Most accounts suggest that Kim Il-song took refuge in the Soviet Union after Japanese forces moved vigorously against Korean Communist guerrilla units in Manchuria in the late 1930s. North Korean hagiographers put guerrilla leader Kim in the Korea-Manchuria border area.

The issue could have important implications for the younger Kim. As successor it is important that his birthplace be established on Korean soil. In recent years, Pyongyang has focused greater attention on the activities of Kim Il-song and Kim Chong-suk during the anti-Japanese guerrilla war period. Although the details of these accounts are vague, they leave the impression that Kim senior spent much of his time operating out of a guerrilla stronghold in the Mount

Paektu area of the border. As such, North Korean propaganda extolling the "spirit of Mount Paektu" can be interpreted in part as an effort to establish the legitimacy of the younger Kim.

Kim Chong-il's early family life is also obscure. According to one account, Kim Chong-il had a younger brother who drowned in a backyard pond when the caretaker left the two boys unattended. Since 1974 a campaign has been under way to depict Kim Chong-suk, Kim Chong-il's mother, who died in 1949 at the age of 32, as a fervent follower of Kim Il-song and a staunch revolutionary in her own right. That program is unquestionably meant to lend support to Kim Chong-il's candidacy.

Kim Il-song remarried in the early 1950s. His second wife, Kim Song-ae, is a member of the KWP Central Committee and chairman of the women's league. She appears regularly in public and is identified as Kim Il-song's wife. Kim Il-song reportedly has a son and daughter by this second marriage, but neither has been mentioned by name in the press. 25X  
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#### **Expanding Duties**

Kim Chong-il is said to have made his first major contribution in the realm of literature and art soon after completing his schooling. He is given credit for directing the film adaptation of a number of well-known Korean plays and classic works. These films, the accounts continue, were produced in record time, and this has been used to characterize his approach to all subsequent endeavors.

Kim Chong-il is also portrayed as having a special interest in engineering and science. He is credited with two concepts in industrial development, in particular the use of computers and long-distance conveyor belts. The North Korean press regularly contains laudatory articles about the successful automation of various industrial processes throughout the country. Some of these

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projects have become the butt of humorous stories

A long-distance coal slurry pipeline is said to have been inoperative for an entire year after Pyongyang announced its commissioning.

There is some circumstantial evidence that Kim Chong-il's role—and hence his stake—in economic affairs goes well beyond these celebrated technical innovations. In February 1974 at the 8th plenum of the KWP Central Committee, Pyongyang introduced a new set of long-range economic targets—the so-called "10 prospective goals." Long-term economic plans are normally promulgated at party congresses; in early 1974 North Korea was just entering the second half of its six-year plan (1971-76), announced at the fifth party congress of the KWP in November 1970.

In retrospect, it appears that the 8th plenum served, in effect, as a small-scale party congress to put the stamp of approval on these new targets. One reason behind this unusual step may have been the desire to mask the involvement of Kim Chong-il in formulating or supervising the implementation of these long-range objectives. Shortly after this plenum, the term "speed battle"—a hallmark of Kim Chong-il—was first applied in a major way to economic production campaigns. The "speed battle" refers to the technique of mobilizing all available manpower resources to achieve a selected goal over a relatively short period of time.

If Kim Chong-il did, in fact, make his debut on the economic scene in early 1974, his timing could not have been worse. Because of the worldwide recession of 1974, demand for North Korean exports of raw materials dropped sharply, and Pyongyang in a short time began to default on the foreign loans it had received to cover imports of whole plants, machinery, and technology from Western Europe and Japan. North Korea's inability to meet even the interest payments on the loans soured Pyongyang's global trade relations and in many cases delayed the delivery of machinery needed to complete the plants.

Despite its economic woes, the regime has not abandoned its ambitious development plans. Pyongyang, after two successive years of "readjustment," formally launched its new seven-year plan (1978-84) in late 1977. The forum was the first sitting of the newly elected national assembly. Four of the original 10 prospective goals—cement, steel, coal, and marine products—were scaled back significantly, but the overall plan still seems to be beyond North Korea's reach.

Kim Chong-il, for his part, seems to have weathered the poor economic performance without any noticeable change in his status. In fact, the adoption in May of this year of a new slogan seems to suggest a somewhat more institutionalized role for Kim Chong-il in guiding the economy. That slogan exhorts the populace to produce more in the "spirit of *Chollima* spurred on by the speed campaign."

The *Chollima*, or winged-horse, campaign refers to a labor-intensive production campaign instituted by Kim Il-song in the late 1950s—then the Korean version of China's "Great Leap Forward." For all practical purposes, Kim Chong-il's speed campaign or "speed battle" is simply an updated version of the earlier movement. Nevertheless, by formally coupling the two concepts, the new slogan elevates the son's contribution in directing the national economy to the same level as that of his father.

#### **Building a Political Base**

Some of the techniques used by Kim Chong-il to strengthen his grip on the economy have a political payoff as well. The three revolutions teams, for example, provide the younger Kim with a separate institutional arm to check on the performance of local party and administrative leaders. The teams are credited with eradicating all sorts of bureaucratic evils and outmoded concepts. In practical terms, this frequently means that many veteran functionaries who have been unable to cope with the new demands made by Pyongyang have been purged or demoted. Over a period of time this process provides an opportunity for the younger Kim to install hand-picked party representatives responsive to his leadership.

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Kim Chong-il also is in a position to exercise his influence through more conventional party channels. According to most reporting, Kim Chong-il has been the party secretary responsible for the important Organization and Guidance Department of the KWP Central Committee since at least 1974. This department coordinates sensitive personnel matters, including promotions, transfers, and demotions for party functionaries from the national to the local level.

The North Korean press has discussed the relationship between the conventional party structure and the three revolutions teams at some length. It has revealed that considerable friction has sometimes arisen between local party officials and team members. Kim Il-song evidently believes that the dynamic tension created by this interaction serves a useful purpose. It broadens political participation by thrusting the youthful members of the teams into the political process earlier than might otherwise be the case. It also keeps the party veterans off balance and probably more attentive to Pyongyang's directives.

In any case, the teams are developing into a permanent fixture on the North Korean political scene. At recent 30th national day celebrations in Pyongyang, Kim Il-song gave the teams a relatively strong endorsement by declaring that the work of the teams in the last five years had confirmed their "advantages and vitality." Inasmuch as the teams have come to be closely identified with Kim Chong-il, the son is a primary beneficiary of the endorsement on national day.

Perhaps the most potent political weapon available to Kim Chong-il is his evident role as chief interpreter, protector, and propagandizer of Kim Il-song's thoughts. Since early 1974 there has been a nationwide movement known as "dyeing the whole of society" with Kim Il-song's thoughts.

Pyongyang's own treatment of the movement leaves little doubt that Kim Chong-il is its motive force.

The movement can be viewed at different levels. First of all it is an effort to link virtually every aspect of North Korean political life to some statement or aphorism from Kim's collec-

tive works. Like Mao Tse-tung's written legacy, practically every word uttered by the elder Kim has been recorded for posterity. Six volumes of Kim's works, some with appropriate revisions, have already been published by Pyongyang.

As Kim Il-song's personality cult has deepened, drawing a distinction between the policy of the KWP and Kim's testimonials has become increasingly difficult. As a result, whoever controls the interpretation and elaboration of Kim Il-song's thoughts in effect sets the party line. By guiding the movement to indoctrinate all of society with Kim's thoughts, the younger Kim is in a position to evaluate the ideological rectitude of party officials and, more importantly, to censure or demote those who are found lacking. As keeper of the faith and as secretary in charge of organizational affairs, Kim Chong-il has two powerful levers by which to expand his influence.

Any attempt to assess the personal traits of Kim Chong-il is, of course, complicated by the absence of firsthand reporting about him. His activities, as portrayed in the North Korean press, do, however, provide a basis for some tentative observations. Like his father, Kim Chong-il has exhibited an intense national pride in the ability of the North Korean people to perform prodigious tasks against all sorts of obstacles if they are properly organized and motivated through mass campaign techniques such as the "speed battle."

The younger Kim has also displayed his father's penchant for taking a direct personal interest in various projects throughout the state and for meeting face to face with workers and officials at the local level. If Kim Chong-il departs in any way from the practices of his father, it may be that his plans are more ambitious and his own budding personality cult more extreme. But he also has demonstrated on occasion an awareness of what the traffic will bear, and he has evidently made adjustments accordingly.

#### **The Elder Kim's Strategy**

Kim Il-song has taken great pains to conceal the plans for his son from the outside world. Kim almost certainly has domestic as well as foreign

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considerations in mind in adopting this unusual scheme. He undoubtedly wants to give the son an opportunity to prove himself in a key but unpublicized role. Despite the elder Kim's immense power and prestige, it will take some time to transfer the political acceptance and legitimacy he enjoys to the son.

By not acknowledging the son's existence to the outside world, Kim Il-song also retains the option of changing his plans if the son, like the President's younger brother, fails to measure up to expectations. The North Korean populace, of course, is fully aware of the father-son succession scheme. As time goes by, it will become increasingly difficult for Kim Il-song to reverse himself without undermining his own prestige. Whether the point of no return has already been reached is a moot question.

Kim Il-song—an activist leader—wants to avoid a lameduck status for himself. He greets foreign dignitaries at the airport, personally presides over all major leadership gatherings, and makes frequent inspection tours of the provinces. The father and son seem to have struck up a workable division of labor, with the son playing the behind-the-scenes role of organizer and enforcer.

By keeping the younger Kim under wraps, Kim Il-song shields North Korea to a certain extent from embarrassing commentary from its allies as well as its detractors. Thus far, China and the Soviet Union, Pyongyang's two treaty allies, have avoided any commentary, public or otherwise, about Kim Chong-il by taking the position that the succession issue is strictly an internal matter.

For reasons of cultural affinity, China is probably more inclined to take at least a tolerant view of a family succession. Peking wants to keep Pyongyang firmly in its camp and therefore is willing to play up to Kim Il-song's personal cult. North Korea, for its part, has been relatively supportive of Hua Kuo-feng's efforts to prevail over his domestic opponents. Pyongyang was one of the first foreign countries to endorse Peking's attack on the Gang of Four.

The Soviets are more distrustful of Kim Il-song and are unwilling to endorse Kim's cult.

They have not forgotten Kim's ingratitude for past assistance and his penchant for taking high-risk actions that jeopardized Soviet strategic interests such as the Pueblo affair and the shoot-down of an unarmed US reconnaissance aircraft. Moscow undoubtedly does not cherish the prospect of trying to cope with Kim junior, who could well be as irascible and unpredictable as his father and in addition lack the seasoning influence of long years of grappling with the tasks of nation-building.

Kim Il-song probably is objective enough to recognize that his succession move is unpopular with other senior North Korean leaders. He certainly has the power to declare his son successor at any time, but he may reason that such an abrupt step might only drive disgruntled elements within the party under cover. Moving in a more deliberate fashion provides the elder Kim a better opportunity to gauge the reaction within influential party circles.

#### **The Case for Opposition**

Kim Il-song's wariness may not be misplaced, as there have been signs that Kim Chong-il's candidacy is coming up against some resistance. Clearly that opposition is not taking the flagrant form of the alleged assassination attempt in the fall of 1977 that had supposedly left Kim Chong-il a vegetable. The story, which did not surface until February 1978

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Rather, the opposition is passive and difficult to measure, even when it surfaces. For example, some of the political movements initiated by Kim Chong-il have elicited less than a positive response from high-ranking party leaders and the national media. The so-called "Campaign to Capture the Red Flag of the Three Revolutions" is a case in point. Kicked off with much enthusiasm in December 1975, the campaign has never really taken hold. It is essentially a mass exhortation movement that seeks to spur greater production by bestowing symbolic rather than material rewards. If the recipient fails to maintain a high level of achievement, the Red Flag award passes on to the next deserving winner.

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On occasion the North Korean media have acknowledged that opposition to the son exists. A [redacted]

Although it is possible to isolate muted signs of opposition to Kim Chong-il, identifying the sources of that opposition is a far more difficult task. A few North Korean leaders have openly identified themselves with Kim Chong-il's cause. They have referred to the "party center" in speeches or have associated themselves with political events designed to boost the younger Kim's prestige. Most of the leadership, however, has not publicly taken a stand.

Despite all of the presumed backstage maneuvering over the succession question in recent years, the top echelon of the party hierarchy has remained relatively stable. At the secondary level, however, there has been considerable turnover. It is tempting to speculate that these personnel changes are related in part to the son's efforts to solidify his control by moving trusted allies into positions of authority. No clear pattern emerges, however; indeed, among some of the political casualties have been persons who were thought at one time to number among the son's political allies because of their relative youth.

#### **The Succession Outlook**

Historically, Communist states have had great difficulty in arranging an orderly transfer of power. By most standards, Kim Chong-il would seem to have more going against him than for him because Kim Il-song's father-son succession scheme has no precedent in the Communist world.

There are, however, some special conditions at work in North Korea that render the son's chances greater than might otherwise be expected. First, of course, is Kim Il-song's great

personal power. Many of his senior lieutenants may be unenthusiastic about the younger Kim, but they are probably loyal to Kim Il-song—he has systematically eliminated his rivals or near-rivals over the years. Thus, their resistance is likely to remain passive as long as Kim senior is around, and, as time goes by, their own numbers will diminish through death and illness.

There are also no obvious challengers to Kim Chong-il. The elder Kim's penchant for personally overseeing virtually every aspect of North Korea's development has created an enormous gap between Kim Il-song and his immediate subordinates. Only party veteran Kim Il has anything approaching an independent stature, and his health is poor.

Finally, North Korea is probably more of a "closed society" than any other country in the world. Cambodia may be more primitive and ruthless, but in North Korea a generation, which has matured under the rigid control of the Korean Workers Party, has received virtually exclusive indoctrination in Kim Il-song's thoughts. To the people, Kim Il-song is both a political leader and a father figure. North Korean propaganda has sought to capitalize on and magnify this personal appeal in order to establish the legitimacy of the son's claim. Kim Chong-il is presented by Pyongyang as the "embodiment" of Kim Il-song's thoughts.

In assessing Kim Chong-il's chances, much depends on the timing and circumstances surrounding Kim Il-song's departure from the scene. Should the elder Kim, who at age 66 maintains an active schedule, continue his reign for another five or 10 years, Kim Chong-il's chances will improve correspondingly. An interval of this magnitude would allow time for several processes to unfold that would be beneficial to the son.

At the most elementary level, it would permit the youthful-looking Kim Chong-il to mature physically and to develop more poise and the kind of commanding presence that has long been exhibited by his father. Korean society, like most Asian cultures, still places a premium on age, equating it with wisdom and authority.

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It would also give the elder Kim sufficient time to orchestrate his son's public unveiling at an appropriate time. When that time might come about is anybody's guess. Given Kim Chong-il's evident role in the current seven-year economic plan, the successful conclusion of that plan might make a suitable occasion for bringing the son forward. The plan is not supposed to end until 1984, but if past experience is a guide, North Korea might claim "prefulfillment" of the plan as early as 1982.

Most of the veteran party leaders who now form Kim Il-song's inner circle of advisers are in their 60s or older. In five to 10 more years a younger generation of leaders inevitably will move into the party elite. These new leaders presumably would be more responsive to the younger Kim, or at least they would present less of a challenge to his authority.

If, on the other hand, Kim Il-song dies or becomes incapacitated in the near term, the likelihood of a struggle over the succession increases measurably. The contest might well take

the form of the traditional palace intrigue. Inasmuch as Kim Chong-il has never been introduced to the outside world, he could be quietly moved off center stage by a coalition of party and military veterans. The anti-Kim Chong-il plotters presumably would be united only in their opposition to the younger Kim.

A succession struggle in North Korea could be accompanied by violence. Kim Il-song has ruled continuously since 1945, and there is no precedent to serve as a guide for a transfer of power.

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outcome, it is doubtful that unrest would be permitted to spread uncontrolled throughout the country or that there would be a general breakdown in law and order. That could invite unwanted intrusion by China or the Soviet Union; worse yet, it could encourage Pyongyang's rival in the South to take advantage of the North's disarray.

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